

The contribution of water security to food security: A crucial inclusion- especially in remote homelands

A submission to the Australian Government's
2024 [Energy, Food and Water Security Inquiry](#)

Submitted by:

Associate Professor Nina Lansbury, School of Public Health, The University of Queensland

Associate Professor Caitlin Wyrwoll, School of Human Sciences, University of Western Australia

Dr Dani Barrington, Senior Lecturer in Global Health, School of Population and Global Health, University of Western Australia

Dr Aunty Mara West (Yamatji), Chair, Healthy Homelands Hub, Coolamon Centre, Ngangk Yira Institute, Murdoch University; Chair, HEAL (Healthy Environment and Lives) Network WA Aboriginal Reference Group

Adjunct Professor Sandra Creamer (Waanyi Kalkadoon), School of Public Health, The University of Queensland

October 16, 2024

The value of listening to lived experiences of water insecurity

This multimedia submission to the Australian Government's 2024 [Energy, Food and Water Security Inquiry](#) focuses on the inclusion of water security as a key aspect of food security, especially in remote settlements, including communities, community living areas and homelands. It is co-authored by two Aboriginal scholars, Dr Aunty Mara West (Yamatji) and Professor Sandra Creamer (Waanyi Kalkadoon) and draws, where possible, from lived experience. Three non-Indigenous academics with research specialties in drinking water, sanitation and associated wellbeing were also co-authors.

The intention to focus on remote water security reflects that Country (traditional estate) is intrinsically linked to Aboriginal Peoples' health, because 'if Country is sick, people are sick' (Rigby et al., 2011). Not having access to secure water supplies can undermine health and wellbeing in a range of health, economic, cultural and other ways, so there is a critical importance of ensuring secure water for Aboriginal Peoples living on Country in regional and remote homelands¹ in Australia (AIHW, 2018).

The challenge of water and its contribution to health living is best described by those with lived experience:

"We don't have a proper water supply out here...

We access drinking water from a rainwater tank. In a drought, we have to buy 10 litre water cartons from town.

We use bore water for washing clothes and for showers. It's salty water straight from the ground.

The Government doesn't listen to us..."

- resident, Williams Well homeland, NT, 2020 in NATSIWA & UQ (2020).



Image: Resident from Williams Well, NT, speaking about water access for remote homelands.

View the full video here: <https://youtu.be/-xnCMiO9oUM> (NATSIWA & UQ, 2020)

¹ Feedback from multiple communities highlights a concern with the phrase 'remote communities as from their point of view, they are not remote. Further, the word remote signals "it's out of sight, out of mind or it's too expensive". To reflect the request of communities we have used the preferred term of 'homelands' throughout.

Such lived experience of food and water insecurity were described in advice on Indigenous Knowledges regarding climate change, commissioned by the Australian Government (2023):

‘Many respondents expressed concern about the impacts of climate change on food and water security for people who already suffer high levels of poverty and economic disadvantage, lack of critical services, and poor health. A Melukerdee respondent highlighted vulnerability to food insecurity risk:

“As Saltwater people, we live off food and resources that come from the ocean. Climate change is making it harder and harder to continue with these cultural practices.... The destruction of special [food producing] places breaks my heart, but also causes me to worry greatly about how our people and our Country can survive.”

Senior Elders and Kulkalgal Elders and Traditional Knowledge keepers from Torres Strait Islands spoke strongly about their concerns about food and water security. A respondent from Kaurareg Country currently living on Ngurupai (Horn Island), identified that unpredictable weather patterns impact sea travel, and disrupt hunting and gathering practices:

“...which leads to food insecurity and more reliance on commercial foods that have health and economic costs” while a senior Mualgal woman from Mua Island spoke about the threat of rising temperatures and insecure water supply: *“heat without water [means we]...cannot plant crops and have water for general living.”*

A senior Saibaigal respondent identified food insecurity from changed rainfall patterns:

“Prolonged wet weather is impacting traditional food crops, causing root rot and rodent damage.”

A Badulaig respondent from the Torres Strait islanders of Badu identified the challenges of insecure rainwater supply, with:

“[There is] not enough heavy rain to refill ground water, waterholes and flush out creeks. Irregular rain also affects fire management and small burns which happen in April. The extended wet makes land management practices difficult.”

(in (Lansbury et al., 2023)).

Contributions from First Nations Peoples' perspectives

Video submission:

Watch the combined video submission here: <https://youtu.be/T-FbKNPNnFE>

About the contributors

Professor Sandra Creamer AM

Sandra Creamer is the former CEO of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) and Adjunct Professor of Public Health at the University of Queensland. She is a Waanyi/Kalkadoon woman, an academic and legal officer. Sandra has worked with Indigenous women in Australia and globally, and believes it is important to empower Indigenous women for self-determination, equality of their rights as well as understanding how they can challenge issues that affect their communities, including drinking water and women's health. Sandra was appointed as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2019 for her leadership service to Indigenous women.

In her video submission, Professor Creamer outlines the contribution of secure water supplies to food security through provision of seeds for food and agribusiness and artisan enterprises based on traditional Country. She describes the challenges in remote communities of water contamination and droughts that limit supply. She emphasises that 'water is life' for Aboriginal Peoples, including her Waanyi and Kalkadoon Peoples. Water is central to cultural continuation, including for ceremony. This, in turn, supports remote community populations' health and wellbeing.



Image: Professor Sandra Creamer speaks to remote water challenges from Waanyi Country (Mt Isa), August 2024

Dr Aunty Mara West

Dr Aunty Mara West is a Yamatji woman who is Chair of the Chair, Healthy Homelands Hub, Coolamon Centre, Ngangk Yira Institute, Murdoch University, and Chair of the HEAL (Healthy Environment and Lives) Network WA Aboriginal Reference Group. In both the public and private sector, Dr West has championed the social, political, and economic position of Aboriginal peoples in Australian society and is a leader in Aboriginal affairs.

Dr West's concerns with homelands community water include the importance of water management for healthy thriving communities. She advocates for community co-design processes so communities are included in conversations regarding environmental health and water issues.

In her video submission, Dr West details how water is life, with interlinkages between food, water, plants and animals. She describes the connections as, 'when we're talking about food security, where there's water for plants or whether it's water for animals out there, it all gets back to clean palatable drinking water.' She highlights the huge challenges for maintaining optimal health in communities faced with poor water quality and sanitation issues. Dr West emphasises that communities need to be better engaged in the operations and maintenance of the systems as well as water supply systems and water testing methods and results.



Image: Dr Aunty Mara West speaks to water security issues for homelands from Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar Country (Perth), August 2024

Broader considerations of water, food and energy security

We have framed this submission to emphasise that considerations of energy and food security for First Nations homelands need to comprehensively address water security. Given the large inequity in access to safe and palatable drinking water in homelands (Wyrwoll et al., 2022), water security is a priority given its importance to human nutrition and health.

- **What does water security mean to you?**

Water security is a key aspect of food security, and thus the focus of this submission. Water security is emerging as a focus of concerns in many remote First Nations homelands concerned about long-term access to reliable supply of clean, safe, drinking water in a changing climate. The agency that coordinates the United Nations' agency on water and sanitation, UN-Water, defines water security as:

"The capacity of a population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for sustaining livelihoods, human well-being, and socio-economic development, for ensuring protection against water-borne pollution and water-related disasters, and for preserving ecosystems in a climate of peace and political stability" (UN-Water, 2013).

Professor Sandra Creamer summarises the direct connection between remote food and remote water security; she emphasises that 'water is life' for Aboriginal Peoples, including her Waanyi and Kalkadoon Peoples. Water is central to cultural continuation, including for ceremony. This, in turn, supports remote community populations' health and wellbeing.

- **How could water and food security be improved in remote communities?**

The videos from our Aboriginal co-authors, Dr Aunty Mara West and Professor Sandra Creamer detail opportunities for improved water security and, in turn, food security.

Professor Creamer details how secure water supplies can contribute to food security through provision of seeds for food, agribusiness and artisan enterprises based on traditional Country.

Dr West identifies specific issues with water quality, water-related infrastructure and hardware that collectively pose challenges for food security in terms of hygiene practice.

- **What community strengths support food and water security?**

Professor Sandra Creamer explains that supportive community strengths include being able to live on Country with sufficient water supplies, to grow traditional foods, and to create businesses that enable families to live on Country and practice culture.

Dr Aunty Mara West reiterates the value of being on Country as a way to strengthen community. She proposes community-led and community-design responses ensure appropriate security responses.

Conclusions

We would like to close our submission with the words provided to this submission by Dr Aunty Mara West that reflect the importance of the Remote Food Strategy to engage with those who have lived experience and can advocate for tailored community-oriented solutions:

“Those problems that we have out in our communities will never be solved if it's a top down approach.

What you need to do is to get out and sit on the ground and start talking to communities about water issues and about food security issues.

Because until you do that, adequate solutions will never ever be reached and people will continue to suffer from these preventable diseases. They will continue to suffer from bad health overall because they don't have access to clean drinking water nor access to good food.”

- Dr Aunty Mara West (Yamatji), Chair, Healthy Homelands Hub, Coolamon Centre, Ngangk Yira Institute, Murdoch University

References

- AIHW. (2018). *Australia's health 2018. Australia's health series no. 16. AUS 221.*
- Lansbury, N., Moggridge, B., Creamer, S., Ireland, L., Buckley, L., Evans, G., Milsom, O., Pecl, G., & Mosby, V. (2023). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' voices and engagement in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: Advice to inform the Australian Government towards IPCC Assessment Report 7.*
- NATSIWA, & UQ. (2020). *Central Desert women talk about their health, their housing and their Country (short film)*, <https://youtu.be/-xnCMiO9oUM> (accessed 7/6/23). .
- Rigby, C., Rosen, A., Berry, H., & Hart, C. (2011). If the land's sick, we're sick:* the impact of prolonged drought on the social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal communities in rural New South Wales. *Australian Journal of Rural Health, 19*(5), 249-254. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1584.2011.01223.x>.
- UN-Water. (2013). *Water Security & the Global Water Agenda: A UN-Water Analytical Brief.* file:///C:/Users/geoff/Downloads/analytical_brief_oct2013_web.pdf
- Wyrwoll, P. R., Manero, A., Taylor, K. S., Rose, E., & Quentin Grafton, R. (2022). Measuring the gaps in drinking water quality and policy across regional and remote Australia. *npj Clean Water, 5*(1), 32. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41545-022-00174-1>